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ABSTRACT

This guide offers practical suggestions from over 100 teachers on how to improve the classroom environment for at-risk students without additional training or materials. All contributors were interviewed and observed in the classroom. Underlying these suggestions are the assumptions that there must be visible administrative support for the efforts of the teacher and that teachers themselves should be the most qualified to teach youths who need special assistance. Sections of the guide cover the following areas: (1) curriculum, emphasizing the importance of relevance to the students' needs; (2) methodology, emphasizing individual instruction, active learning, and role modeling; (3) counseling and advocacy, emphasizing student-teacher relationships; (4) community partnerships, emphasizing connecting the classroom to the real world; and (5) transitions, emphasizing career preparation and living in a multicultural society. Each area lists "essential ingredients," the basic motivational components related to the area of concern, and recommendations from practitioners, related in their own words. Brief personal narratives illustrate the attitudes of at-risk students towards school. (FMW)

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Educating At-Risk Youth:

Practical Tips for Teachers

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1990

'We teach them and scare them

for twenty odd years

and then we expect them to choose a career,

but they really can't function,

they're so full of fear....'

--John Lennon

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Introduction

New roles for teachers

There is plenty of research documenting the characteristics of at-risk youth and analyzing the many complicated reasons that, for some youth, high school completion can be like climbing Mt. Everest. Some of these youth face so many barriers and frustrations--social, economic, and personal--that they lead dangerously dysfunctional lives. Some of them may never graduate from high school. This situation, unfortunately, probably will exist until the basic structure of our society reflects the goals of equity and social justice.

However, many of our youth who do not graduate could, in fact, graduate if: 1) we assume a new vision of the role of public schools in our society today, and 2) partnerships between educational, social, and economic forces become policy rather than the flagship exception. This new vision calls for redefining roles, restructuring the traditional system, reallocating resources, and redesigning policies. Not easy.

This guide tackles the first element in this new vision: redefining the role of the classroom teacher. It makes no attempt to address major policy issues, system restructuring or school finances. Additionally, it does not address some unavoidable realities such as large class size, out-of-date curriculum mandates, inflexible structures, chemical dependency, teen parenthood, physical abuse, learning disabilities, poor nutrition, and other real conditions that make learning so difficult. With no intent to minimize the roadblocks to effective teaching faced by teachers on a daily basis, here we address what a lone classroom teacher can do with no additional resources or training.

There are many teachers across the country who are successfully motivating discouraged, disengaged youth. Many are doing it without amazing resources or specialized training; they are doing it because of their ability to make their classroom the most personally rewarding place their students know. These teachers create a learning environment that makes their students want to return to the classroom each day instead of succumbing to despair or temptation. This guide represents highly qualified practitioners in the Northwest and their colleagues nationwide who say, "Here's what I do in my classroom [or program] that motivates many of my most discouraged youth."

The ideas presented here were contributed by teachers who are successfully redefining the roles they play in the lives of their students. As they depart from the traditional expectations about teaching algebra or English or social studies or whatever, they expand the role of "teacher" to encompass the needs of each young person they find in their presence; these teachers are becoming counselors, family advisors, advocates, mentors, and friends. Not easy, but doable.

The strategies in this guide *do work* for the teachers who suggested them, *can work* with most of the students who get themselves to school, and *will work* for teachers who are looking for fresh approaches to motivate the students who are at risk of failure.

The students: who they are and what they say

It is now common knowledge that about one quarter of the students who start high school do not receive a diploma. Who are the at-risk youth in our schools today?

> *My name is James and I'm 16 years old. My girl friend just had a baby and I'm either going to break up with her or quit school and get a job. I'm sure I can get a good job to support us, so I guess I better start looking at the want ads tomorrow.*

> *My name is Bill. My mom left about a year ago and my dad works two jobs. My two sisters and I hardly ever see him and he doesn't seem to care where we are or what we do--when he's home he's asleep. So I stay out late with my friends doing drugs and hardly ever make it to my morning classes. Looks like my sisters are following in my footsteps, but what am I supposed to do? I'm only 15.*

> *My name is Sheila. I've run away from home twice because my dad abuses me and threatens to beat me up if I tell anyone. I've been in two foster homes but they were like prisons. I like school and I do pretty well, and all my teachers think I'm just peachy fine, but I can't stand living like this. I think I'll go to Seattle and support myself. I hear you can make money pretty easy there.*

> *My name is Jimmie and I've never got better than a C in class since grade school. I know I'm not dumb, cause I catch on to things and I can remember real well. But my classes just don't seem to have anything to do with me or my life. My parents are so busy they never even ask me if I have any homework to do. Neither of them graduated from high school and look at them--they're doing fine.*

My name is Kenneth. I'm on the junior varsity basketball team and I'm having a great time --the coach really teaches me a lot about being responsible. My problem is that I'm flunking a class, only one, and they'll kick me off the team if I don't pass all my classes. The only reason I stay in school is to play ball. I'm trying to catch up, but there's no way you can get any homework done in my house. I don't even have a bedroom or a place to sit and get any work done.

My name is Angela. I don't have any friends except my little sister, and nobody seems to care about me. I hear kids talk about me because I'm just learning to speak English and I don't have very nice clothes. My teachers give me passing grades because I never cause any problems, but I don't think I'm learning anything. I feel sort of invisible and I think I'd rather be gone than keep coming here.

My name is Juanita and I just had a baby. My mom takes care of my baby, but she says I have to work, too, to help support us. So what with working every afternoon and taking care of my baby in the evening, some mornings I'm just too tired to get up to go to school. You guessed it, I'm flunking my three morning classes and now probably won't graduate. I'm a senior. I might as well quit and get a full time job. I know later on I'll regret not having a diploma, but if I'm not going to graduate anyway, why not quit now?

My name is Mai. I came here from a refugee camp in Cambodia where both my parents disappeared. I think they're dead. I live here with my older brother and our cousins. They don't speak any English and they don't work. One of my cousins is in a gang and I'm getting scared. I know education is the key to success in America, but I'm so depressed about my life that some days I feel like killing myself.

While those profiles truly reflect many of our students' lives, what we hear many of them say is...

I hate school.
I don't care.
This is boring.
I don't understand.
We did this last year.

When will I ever need to know this?
This is stupid.
Nobody ever listens to me.
I just want to get a good job, that's all.
Why go to school, anyway?
I'm going to quit as soon as I get a job.
None of this makes any sense.
I'm only here so I can play on the ... team.
My coach is the only one who understands me.

And some say nothing at all.

Essential ingredients

Think of this guide as you would a recipe. For example, if you wanted to bake a loaf of bread, there are certain basic ingredients you need, i.e. flour, yeast, liquid, salt. There are many other ingredients you *could* add to the recipe, such as grains and herbs, but they are optional; it would still be bread without them. Similarly, think of the sugar, flour, oats, shortening, and eggs for oatmeal cookies or the beans for frijoles refritos. They are the basic ingredients; they are not optional.

This guide identifies the basic ingredients--we call them "essential ingredients"--that Northwest practitioners are using to motivate discouraged youth. If a teacher took this guide to heart and did only what is suggested here, the students in that teacher's classes would be more successful than students in the class of a teacher who did not recognize the importance of the basic ingredients in this guide.

Two critical assumptions

There are at least two critical assumptions underlying this document. First, there must be visible administrative support for the efforts of the teachers. Second, the teachers themselves should be the most qualified to teach youth who need special assistance. Let's think about each of those--administrative support and staffing/staff development--for a moment, because without them, this guide will not be very useful.

Embedded in the research about effective schools is the belief that the most successful schools have a leader who is strong and committed. This is especially critical for teachers who are teaching the youth who, without special care, may choose to leave the school setting; in this environment the leader must be openly, actively and vocally committed to offering an equitable

education for all students, directing particular attention to those most at risk. Listed here are a few guidelines related to administrative support and staffing/staff development that lead to increased student success:

- Place only the most empathetic, caring, dedicated and dauntless teachers in classes with at-risk youth; teachers without those qualities will drive youth out of school.
- Maximize opportunities for providing teachers information, inservice, and insights about the characteristics of at-risk youth, why they are at risk, and what their needs are.
- Encourage team teaching, professional peer assistance, mentor teachers, and a buddy system for new teachers.
- Work to achieve the lowest student-teacher ratio possible; use instructional aides, volunteers, senior citizens, parents, older students whenever possible.
- Convince the staff that it is their job to identify the at-risk students in their classes and to devote as much energy as they can muster to motivate those youth to achieve academic success and personal growth.
- Encourage staff to depart from traditional curriculum materials and teaching techniques in order to address the unique personal and educational needs of every student in the class.
- Publicly recognize and reward teachers who successfully motivate the students who are most at risk.
- Encourage and approve nontraditional credit accrual for students who do not learn in traditional ways, e.g., community service, alternate assignments, applied academics in cooperation with vocational education.
- Create an atmosphere that models and fosters some qualities which may be missing in the homes of many youth: warmth, cheerfulness, enjoyment of learning, and social and personal bonding.

Who should use this guide?

This guide is organized into the following five areas:

1. Curriculum
2. Methodology
3. Counseling and Advocacy
4. Community Partnerships
5. Transitions

As we interviewed and observed well over 100 teachers who contributed to this guide, it became difficult to draw clean lines between the five areas of concern. In particular, it was not easy to separate curriculum from methodology; nonetheless, we left both categories intact, realizing that the category is far less important than the usefulness of the strategy itself.

All of the strategies in this guide have "withstood the test of time" in a high school or middle school classroom. They are suggested to you by teachers of many subject areas; some have been teaching for more than 30 years; some are new to the field. As of this writing, all are currently working with at-risk youth in either a teaching or counseling capacity.

We are suggesting that teachers stretch their "job description," and we are suggesting that administrators encourage and support teachers' creative and innovative efforts. Clearly, contributors to this guide believe that teachers who do not make the most creative, caring, and committed efforts to reach students and "reel them in" should not be teaching the youth who are in need of multiple interventions for the multiple problems they face. As one teacher put it, *"All the know-how in the world is worth nothing if the kids won't seek you out. To me, that should be a teacher's main objective, to gain students' trust and respect."*

Recognizing the many challenges and barriers teachers face in working with students who show little motivation to learn, we hope the ideas here will help. While some of these practices would certainly be effective for motivated students who are successful already, this guide was written specifically for teachers who have many students at risk of not graduating or of graduating unprepared for adulthood. Since each classroom has its own personality and culture, some of these ideas may not seem right for you at all, while others may turn out to be just the ones that might make a difference.

We suggest that you browse through these pages, watching for ideas that you think might be useful for the students in your classes today, setting other ideas aside for another day or another class. Every teacher has his or her own unique style, and some of these tips will fit your style more than others. While the essential ingredients are truly essential, the recommended tips from practitioners are meant to be a menu of options from which to choose.

Some of you will have little use for this guide because you are already practicing many of these common sense strategies with great success. Congratulations. Keep it up, and please share your successes with your colleagues.

Essential Ingredients...

- Make the curriculum useful and meaningful for the students today as well as in their futures.
- Structure academic success for all students and use their successes to address positive attitudes and self-esteem.
- Communicate clear learning goals that are challenging and reachable for all students and frequently encourage students to articulate and apply the goals to their own lives.
- Within any subject area, teach reasoning, communication, and life survival, as well as work attitudes and habits.
- Make it experiential whenever possible (for example, provide opportunities for community service, individual or group projects, and internships).
- Adapt the curriculum materials so they speak directly to the needs of the students. Don't rely only on the educational materials you have been given; improvise and scrounge when necessary.

Recommendations from Practitioners...

- As often as possible, I use the front page of the newspaper for the first five minutes of class to relate my course content to the world around us.

- I use my students' names in math story problems or other hypothetical situations. They feel recognition in a comfortable and nonthreatening way.

- I write learning goals on the chalkboard every day. I refer to them at the beginning of the class and after explaining the goal, I might say, "This is what I expect us to accomplish today. Does anybody have any questions or concerns?" At the end of the class I'll say, "Now let's refer to our goal for today and see if we reached it." This assures students that my lesson has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

- Goals for a certain week or for a particular unit of study can be treated the same way as the daily goals described above. We give the students academic weekly calendars. They work. We get them free from the local university, but we've also printed our own.

- Sometimes I put a complex question on the board, instead of a goal; it is a question that the students will be able to answer at the end of the lesson. Using the critical thinking process in conjunction with a very clear closure to the lesson will enable the students to feel the purpose of the lesson.

"I have not completed a school year since the seventh grade and I am 17 years old now. This school is different. They don't care what you've done. They only care about what you are willing to do."

--Alternative School Student, Alaska

- I encourage students to ask questions about the goals or the lessons, such as, "Why are we doing this?" or "How will I be able to use this information when I graduate?" If I can't answer the question, I might want to reconsider where I'm headed. If I can answer the question, it will help students see the purpose of what they are doing.

- I teach students how to listen, question, and discuss. We often expect them to have these skills when they don't. I refuse to let them leave my classroom without learning those basic skills that successful employees need for survival.

- Extend grading and evaluation beyond traditional written tests and quizzes. I encourage students to choose their own methods of presentation that reflect their own learning style, such as an oral presentation, a photo essay, a poem, a story, or a video.

- I try to find out what other classes my students are taking. Then I talk with those teachers to see what they are teaching and try to relate it to what I am teaching. Students need to see connections between their classes. This will help make school an integrated and purposeful experience for them, not a string of unrelated classes.

- In our class we reinforce the pleasure of reading by having students read to persons at a retirement home or a hospice. Also, we encourage writing by integrating a "pen pal" activity into the curriculum.

- Because my students do not bound into my class having made the academic/ intellectual transition from yesterday to today, I start each lesson with a reference to where we left off last time we were together.

"Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there."

--Will Rogers

- When students fail a test, I allow them the opportunity to retake it without penalty. This encourages self-motivated studying!

- During the first week of school, I have my students complete a special interests/talents questionnaire. I use this information as often as I can to call on students to contribute their particular expertise to a class project. This is especially important for shy or reticent students whose skills might never become visible to others unless I make a concerted effort to draw them out.

- The more I know about my students, the better able I am to apply what I am teaching to their personal lives. For example, if I know that Angela does a lot of babysitting after school and on weekends, I could relate her work to units on nutrition, personal finance, math, and labor unions, so that she will feel the class has some direct meaning for her life today.

- Assuming that few, if any, of my students will ever win the lottery, I try to connect everything I teach to their futures as adult wage earners. For example, my students create job profiles for characters in literature or history. I occasionally invite in a vocational teacher to discuss which jobs and careers require skills in my content area.

- I bring in news articles about local people and discuss their jobs and careers in relation to my curriculum.

- I try to empower my students by giving them choices about their work. For example, if I require a novel, I might give them a list of books and let them choose the one they want to read. Or, if I have some goals that are nonsequential, I let them choose the order in which we work on them.

"Ignorance doesn't kill you, but it makes you sweat a lot."

--Haitian Proverb

- As I plan my curriculum, I personalize it to the lives of the students who are in each of my classes. I use their names, interests, backgrounds, and families to develop hypothetical cases and examples.

- Students love to read their own and each others' writing. After writing group and/or individual stories, we turn our classroom into a "publishing house" and make a booklet (with a cover, a list of authors, a table of contents, etc.) out of the stories the class has written. We distribute it in the school, show it to the principal or the superintendent, send it home, and ask the local newspaper to come in to interview the authors; all of those activities will assure public recognition for the students' creative accomplishment.

- Using a computer, I help the class do a monthly newsletter that is distributed throughout the local community as well as the school. We highlight accomplishments of the students who do not usually get recognition; write student profiles; print a story about the student of the week/month; and include student writings or quotations.

- I start each day with 15 minutes of silent reading. Everyone reads, including the teacher. That way, everybody starts out successfully having accomplished something. Reading for pleasure begets reading for pleasure.

- I often group students so they can make up practice tests and quizzes for each other. We use them for quick drills and recall; they are fun, nonthreatening, and ungraded.

"Education's purpose is to replace an empty mind with an open one."

--Malcolm Forbes

Essential Ingredients...

- Identify students' learning styles and address those styles by using a variety of instructional techniques, such as cooperative learning, small group instruction, peer tutoring, self-paced activities, and a combination of visual/oral/tactile activities.
- Teach as much as possible in a way that individualizes the class for each student, trying to "personalize" it at the same time.
- Create a positive learning environment by using incentives, immediate feedback, and a grading system that encourages success for all students.
- Establish and communicate clear expectations and high performance standards, but also have a minimum number of rules that can be broken, ignored, or forgotten.
- Communicate as often as possible with other adults who work with your students inside the school as well as outside, such as counselors, other teachers in the building, social workers, and youth employment specialists.
- Model behavior that you expect from your students, such as respect, loyalty, flexibility, willingness to listen, caring, and a cheerful attitude.
- Actively involve each and every student in learning activities; make it your mission to engage the disengaged every single day.

Recommendations from Practitioners...

- I start each year with several "getting acquainted" activities. I always play a "name game" with students the first day or two until everyone knows everyone else's name. Sometimes we repeat it when a new student enters the class. I make sure that I know every student's name by the end of the first week of school. I use their names every day! Instead of saying, "Hi, welcome to class today" as a student enters the room, I say, "Hi, Alonzo, welcome to class today."

- In the first couple of weeks of school, I figure out which of my students are at greatest risk of not succeeding. I promise myself that I will have a positive interaction with each of them at least once a day, for example, a smile, a handshake, a pat on the back, a positive comment about their work, or a question that expresses my interest in their life. I know that if I make them feel good in my class they will want to come back for more! Who wouldn't?!

- When class begins, I greet my students at the door. I call them by name with a smile on my face and I let them know that I am glad they are there. Daily positive acknowledgement is a sure setup for success.

- I encourage ownership and commitment to class rules and expectations by involving students in setting them up. At the same time, I let them know which expectations are absolute requirements for me and my sanity. Then I teach the rules, model them, and reteach them as needed. When I start off expecting them to know how to follow the rules, I am setting some students up for failure right off the bat.

"Imagination is more important than information."

--Albert Einstein

- Rules need to be strictly enforced. Unclear boundaries are confusing and unfair. If I let things ride one day and come down hard the next, I confuse them. I say, "All of you are great kids, but this is my sandbox and we are going to play by my rules." And "my rules" in this case can be the rules that the students and I decided upon together.

- I limit the number of rules to no more than five; the more rules we have, the more opportunity there is to break them. Avoid vague ones that are difficult to enforce. For example, instead of saying "Respect others," say "Only one person speaks at a time." Help students phrase them positively; instead of saying "don't...", say "do..."

- I ask students to memorize the rules so well that they can explain the rationale for each one, particularly when a new student joins the class. Articulation reinforces understanding and will encourage internalization of the expectations. I repeat this articulation exercise whenever necessary.

- We must have a sense of humor and a long fuse. They are a matched set and without them we are dead in the water.

- Unless you are a stand-up comedian capable of entertaining the troops every day, start a "humor fund" that everyone contributes to. Bring in a cartoon, a funny quotation, or a riddle that relates to the curriculum. Ask students to contribute on a daily or weekly basis. Don't allow negative humor of any sort. For students who have little humor in their lives, your classroom will draw them in--after all, isn't laughter the best medicine?!

"The most underused technology in American education is not computers--it's conversation."

--Stanley Pogrow,
University of Arizona

- Be honest. If their skirt's too short, tell them. If they need to work on personal hygiene, tell them. If their "blood and guts" artwork disgusts you, tell them. If they look terrific in something new, tell them. Genuine compliments are a rarity for these kids and they can't get enough of them. Too many teachers for too many years have spewed impersonal and rote phrases at them. They will thrive on a true and personal compliment from you!

- Every now and then I try to put myself in my students' shoes. How would I feel sitting in my class right now? Are they excited about what I'm teaching? Am I?!! Do they see the reason for what we are studying? Do I?!! After doing this, I sometimes find myself picking up the pace, being a little more enthusiastic, talking less, and listening more.

- Students deserve my enthusiasm. I try to "see" smiles on their faces even when I don't. Sometimes it helps.

- I write notes to my students, especially in a large class when I can't get around to everybody. I can plan what to say and how to say it. It's private, personal, and special attention. You can sometimes say things more easily in writing, such as "Mike, a book report is no big deal, just do it!" (to a student who won't do the book report). Or, "Mike, this is a friendly note. You didn't read much yesterday and today. You need to read. Reading is what we do here. Do you need another book?" (to a kid who won't read) Kids like notes in class; they do it with their friends. One teacher has a mail slot for each student to make the note passing even easier!

"Tomorrow's illiterate will not be the person who cannot read. Tomorrow's illiterate will be the person who has not learned how to learn."

--Alvin Toffler

- If a student says, "I don't care," don't take it personally. You can say: "That's okay. You don't know anything about it yet, so there's no reason for you to care. That's okay. I'll do the caring here. You just do the learning." When I react to their negativity, I always find myself in a "lose-lose" situation.

- I am painfully explicit during instructions--straightforward and clear: "Your eyes must be on this film. That is your job today," Or "Now I'm going to give instructions for the next activity and everyone needs to look right at me." I don't let them *not* pay attention to me.

- Doing a learning style inventory at the beginning of the year is important. It helps me present the curriculum in ways that all students can succeed. It also helps to do a survey of their perceived strengths and weaknesses. This really helps me design activities that I know some students will complete successfully; I try to build in success for everyone.

- When moving from group work to an individual assignment, I allow students two minutes to talk among themselves to clarify the assignment, get materials, have a quick chat, and get settled. It helps the quiet times get quieter much quicker!

- I use cooperative learning techniques whenever possible. We do group editing, cooperative problem-solving, and partner reading and response. Some effective ways to break kids into groups are by interest, skills, work habits, and sometimes they choose their own groups.

"What is soul? It's like electricity--we don't really know what it is, but it's a force that can light a room."

--Ray Charles

- I contract with individual students regarding how much work they will complete within a specified period of time. I train them to manage their own learning by setting their own goals, working towards them, and monitoring progress. I also set goals for myself so there is a mutual accountability system in operation.

- I find as many ways as I can to give public recognition to my students who are at risk of possible failure. Some ideas that have worked are: 1) select one student a month to attend a local chamber of commerce meeting (or something like that) with me or with the principal; 2) select a student of the week or student of the month--take their picture with a Polaroid (or a roll of film you can take to a two-hour processing place and bring in the next day) and post it on the bulletin board for others to see, admire, and respect; 3) send notes to the principal when a student is particularly successful and make sure that the principal acknowledges that student. Also, I post student work on the classroom walls. All human beings need positive recognition; our students have had very little of it and need a lot of it.

- I share things about myself with my students. It need not be a gut-wrenching revelation; but it needs to be true. I tell them I dye my hair. They think it's funny and a big secret. (You could tell them you used to be overweight or a nerd in high school.) They can look at you and see a glimmer of hope for their future. They can't believe that a successful person has ever been anything but successful and we all know that that's not necessarily true!

"Some people march to a different tune--and some people polka."

--Unknown

- I give students daily feedback on their work. I try to notice improvements in their grades and let them know I've noticed. I use stickers, stamps, and personal comments on their work--my students love it. Daily quick quizzes can show immediate positive results. I give A++, A+, A, and A- and I put all A scores on the board with students' names. Don't be bound by your traditional grading system on a day-to-day basis.

- If I'm having a bad day, for any reason, I tell my students, "Okay, guys, on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being low and 10 being high, I'm pretty close to a 2 right now. So let's be reeeeaaaal careful today!" You'd be amazed how caring they can be, if you just let them know you need it. They need it, too, and you can ask them where they are on a scale of 1 to 10. One year it became sort of a ritual for me and my classes and I've never seen such respect for other people's feelings!

- When a student says something inappropriate, it is more effective to respond by modeling something appropriate than it is to reprimand. This is difficult at first, but it gets easier in time.

"Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today, because if you enjoy it today, you can do it again tomorrow."

--Anonymous

Counseling and Advocacy

Essential Ingredients...

- Learn what special needs each of your students has and make sure that the students know you care enough to help them in any way that you can.

- Make sure that each student feels comfortable and wanted in your classroom; establish a personal relationship with each student and design activities that result in positive relationships among the students.

- You are not in this alone! Actively cooperate--initiate if you have to--with local community support services for teens, such as youth service centers, private industry councils, health clinics.

- To successfully motivate and teach at-risk youth, the teacher must also be a counselor, friend, and advocate.

Recommendations from Practitioners...

- I teach my students to set up a personal support network. They write down three favorite teachers and three favorite friends in the school whom they would trust if they needed them. Then they research community resources that are there to assist us, such as hot lines, teen health clinics, and youth service centers. Though it is not always possible, I try to get the students to actually visit some of these places, so that they won't feel strange when they really need them. Each student completes a personal support network chart with names and phone numbers. They keep a copy and so do I.

- Personal contact is so important that I try to meet individually with each of my most at-risk students at least once a week. It might be chatting for a few minutes at the end of class, meeting for a few quick moments in the hall, having a Coke together after school or whenever we can find the time. I particularly like having lunch with a student occasionally; eating with one another is such a fundamental and natural activity that it seems to bring people closer together. A few of my students connected with me only after we ate lunch together, and it was even in the school cafeteria!

- Unless I see blood, I try to support the efforts of my students to resolve their conflicts themselves. I teach anger management and conflict resolution techniques by role playing and by modeling appropriate behavior.

Whenever I see the "10 Most Wanted List"...I have always thought this: If we'd made them feel wanted earlier, they wouldn't be wanted now.

--Eddie Cantor

- I encourage my students to become involved in support groups offered in the school or in the community, such as teen moms group, Al-Anon, and recovery groups. More and more schools offer such groups, but students often need help getting to them and sticking with it.

- I find out which of my most at-risk students are participating in extracurricular activities and if their families are attending. If I sense the need, I attend one or two of their events; it is a real valuable boost to my personal relationship with that student and to my ability to exert positive influence on him or her.

- One of the most effective ways I give positive feedback to my students is to send notes home to their parent(s) or guardian. I try telephoning, but some parents are hard to reach, so I rely on "positive postcards." I rack my brain to find something positive to say about some of the kids, but I always come up with something, and it sure does get those students more involved in the class and make them more trusting of me.

- When a student returns to class from an extended absence, such as a suspension, I greet them with a smile and tell them I am glad they are back, even when sometimes I'm not sure that I'm glad. Often this cordial reentry ritual has a lasting effect--how many other teachers do you think said they were glad this "problem kid" was back in class?!

"The entire sum of existence is the magic of being needed by just one person."

--Vi Putnam

Community Partnerships

Essential Ingredients...

- Connect school with living in the "real world" by "de-isolating" your classroom from the local community.

- Seek out the most interesting and committed people in your community to be role models and to enrich the curriculum.

- Make both the curriculum and the community come alive for the students by applying local and current examples to every lesson taught.

- Know which of your students are working and integrate their work experiences, and possibly their employers, into the curriculum.

Recommendations from Practitioners...

- Ask a local business to "adopt" one or more of your classes. They can do any number of things depending on the business and your curriculum, such as be mentors for some or all of the students, donate incentives, visit the class as guest speakers or as tutors, provide career explorations, be pen pals, or engage in a joint community service project. All of these activities help the students see the business community as friendly and helpful; additionally, because the students get the idea that they will enter that community after they leave school, they are more willing to learn the skills required to succeed in it.

- There are many private residences around our school, and there is often tension between the longtime neighbors and the students. In order to improve this relationship, we 1) invite neighbors in to have lunch with small groups of students, 2) give students time to deliver personally the school newspaper, 3) have the home economic students bake treats for some of the neighbors during the holidays, and 4) schedule neighborhood service days in which the students rake leaves, and do other odd jobs for senior citizens. We often get thank you notes in return, and this really helps connect the students with the people around the school, especially the students who seem so disconnected from everything.

- We ask local retail stores, especially those right in the neighborhood of the school, to donate items, such as clothing, music, food, or gift certificates that we can use as incentives for students. We then give them recognition at our awards banquets and in the school newspaper. Sometimes the students write to them, practicing their letter writing skills.

"There is no greater loan than a sympathetic ear."

--Frank Tyger

Community Partnerships

- We do a unit on the history of our neighborhood, and we invite senior citizens who have lived there a long time to act as resource people. Students collect data from them as primary sources, and then they ask these same people to help them review the papers they write.

- Believing that it is important for disengaged students to engage themselves in meaningful activities, I investigate possibilities for some of my students to get involved in leadership activities in the community. Some of my least motivated students were really excited about being on a board of directors for a youth agency or for a community library. They learned leadership skills by actually doing them, instead of reading about them.

- So often the local media only pick up the negative happenings around a school, like fights or low test scores or racial tension. I make it a point of contacting the daily newspaper when my at-risk youth do something that I deem newsworthy, such as reading stories to children in a local hospital (improves their reading skills) or going shopping for senior citizens in the neighborhood (improves their math skills and builds self-esteem). Of course, I help structure those experiences, but then I always work together with the community to publicly recognize the youth for their efforts.

- A number of our at-risk youth have parole officers, case workers, or job counselors through their subsidized jobs in the summer. These people all see the youth from a different perspective than I do in the classroom, so whenever I am getting nowhere with a student, I call one of these significant others. Invariably, the conversation will help, if only to assure me that I am not alone in my frustration. And often we come up with a cooperative plan of some sort. It's also good for the student to know that some of these special efforts on his or her behalf are connected and not random.

"Love cures people--both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it."

--Dr. Karl Menninger

Community Partnerships

- So many of our at-risk students leave high school without the skills they need to survive as a wage earner. As hard as I try to teach interviewing techniques, I am never as effective alone as I am when I include a local employer in the class. We do applications and mock interviews and invite a supervisor from a local store to participate. When that other adult says to the student(s), "That application would not get you an interview and let me tell you why," or "That was a near perfect interview--let's analyze it," they are all ears. But when I say the exact same words, it falls flat!

- One reason for low self-esteem is that students don't feel purposeful or useful; they're not involved in anything of social significance. In my classes we identify community problems and then we form task forces to help solve the problems. Each task force has roles assigned to each student as they interview and work with members of the local community. One task force was asked to present their plan to a Chamber of Commerce subcommittee; it was videotaped and you could just see the pride glow in the students as they watched the video.

- Since many of my students are working at part-time jobs and many of them are not the sterling employees we would hope for, I use class time to engage them in peer problem solving. We pick a "job problem of the week" to role play a variety of solutions. Occasionally, I bring in a local employer to mediate and judge the effectiveness of different role plays. This helps the students know that if they have problems on their job, 1) they are not alone, and 2) there is good advice available for the asking.

"The nice thing about teamwork is that you always have others on your side."

--Margaret Carty

Community Partnerships

- It's not always easy to accomplish, but I require that each of my students--either individually or in small groups--make some kind of contribution to their community during the school year. They describe to me in writing what it is they are going to do, what purpose it will serve, how the receiver(s) will benefit, and how they think they will benefit. Some service projects my students did last year include sending Christmas cards to everyone in a nearby convalescent home, escorting youngsters out on Halloween night, cleaning up around the neighborhood store that the students frequent after school, and helping clean leaves out of gutters for senior citizens who live near the school. After they complete their project they write about civic pride and responsibility. A lot of students receive thank you letters and we post them on the bulletin board, put them in the school newspaper, send them home, and copy them to the principal and the superintendent. As one student said simply, "I feel good when I do good."

"We must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope."

--Martin Luther King, Jr.

Essential Ingredients...

- Teach students the skills required to earn a living in today's quickly changing technological society, such as flexibility, willingness to learn new things, communicating with different types of people, and coping with the unexpected.

- Sensitize students to our increasingly multiethnic society; address equity, appreciation of cultural pluralism, and cultural pride.

- Arm students with accurate career information that reflects both the local and national labor market.

- Include in the curriculum personal success skills such as assertiveness, problem solving, and negotiating.

Recommendations from Practitioners...

- Too many students don't know how to access available resources in their immediate environment. We use a bus route scavenger hunt to teach them to feel comfortable getting around town. They have to find practical items that they may need in the near future, such as a tax form, a bus schedule, an application for credit, and an application to the community college. I may also ask them to go to the appropriate office to report a crime, get a library card, secure a student pass to the museum, or get a schedule of performances at the civic auditorium. A lot of them have never taken the bus across town before. You can also use this activity to teach proper telephone skills if the students need to make an appointment to complete part of the scavenger hunt.

- I teach my students those simple basics without which they won't survive in the job market: greeting someone, introducing oneself in person and on the phone, asking and responding to questions cordially. We do role plays, using audiotapes and videotapes; I emphasize that these are basic skills along with reading, writing, and computing. We reinforce it every day in class with cordial hellos and goodbyes, making sure the students ask questions of each other as well as of me. Also, whenever someone new enters the classroom, one of the students introduces the person to the class.

"Hope for the best. Expect the worst. Life is a play. We're unrehearsed."

--Mel Brooks

- Every student in my class has a "job" for which he or she is responsible. Some of the jobs are attendance reporter, humorist, graphic designer for the bulletin board, photographer, documentation specialist; jobs are rotated, but we go through interviews, job conflicts, and performance evaluations. This provides a natural laboratory in which to teach employability skills without leaving the classroom.

- One of our class goals every year is to increase students' appreciation of our multicultural society. We make a calendar that notes holidays of every ethnic group in the class and we distribute the calendar throughout the school, as well as to parents. Once a month we "celebrate" one of the holidays with music, food (of course), guest speakers, and dress. Toward the end of the year we put on an International Fair, and we're thinking of expanding it to the whole school.

- Many of the skills that my students need to survive in school are the same skills that they need to become successful employees. So I tell them that. One example is flexibility and learning to cope with change. I make sure that minor calamities happen in our class occasionally so the students can learn to cope with them productively. One example was scheduling a guest speaker and then I secretly called to reschedule it without telling the class. Since we had planned to videotape the guest, we ended up videoing the students' reactions. I then used that video the next day to teach a lesson on "adapting to unexpected change in the workplace." Sometimes I tell them my secret and sometimes I don't!

"The right to do something does not mean that doing it is right."

--William Safire

- Adjusting to a new situation is something we have to do over and over, and some students don't know that it's important for jobs as well as for school and personal lives. Toward the end of the year I recruit a group of my ninth-grade students, some who adjusted well to high school and some who didn't, to make presentations to eighth-graders at the middle school. Preparing for these presentations is a whole-class activity that revolves around making transitions from one environment to another.

- We all know that cooperation and teamwork are skills that employers value highly, but that many students do not have. In addition to doing a lot of cooperative learning activities, I ask some of the coaches to come in and talk with the students about the necessity of teamwork. Then, to help students make the connection between sports and work, I schedule a coach and a work supervisor to be on a panel together to discuss how cooperation equals survival in both of their domains.

- Students often don't see the connection between school and earning a living, so I bring in as guest speakers all of the vocational teachers in the school. It's amazing, but some of the students still are surprised that they can learn a marketable job skill in high school; they also learn about the 2+2 program through which they can earn community college credit for classes taken in high school. This helps them see a purpose for high school.

"If one is lucky, a solitary fantasy can totally transform one million realities."

--Maya Angelou

- Some schools offer a class for seniors called Transitions; it can be taught by one of the school staff or a staff member of the local private industry council or an employment counselor from a youth service agency. Typical activities include application and resume writing, analyzing career interest/aptitude assessments, job search, interview techniques, and field trips to employment offices and job training centers. The most successful ones get the students in direct contact with potential employers either in the school or at a work site.

- We've been talking about career awareness for years now, but somehow lots of the kids still don't "get it." A couple of successful activities I use seem to broaden their awareness of what's out there: 1) I ask the students to keep a log of all the jobs they observe during a three-day period: on the way to school, at school, shopping, cruising, watching TV, at a doctor's appointment, and so forth. We then make a composite list and do other activities based upon that list; 2) I divide the class into groups of four and assign each group a city block in a business section of town. They draw a map of the block, and for every building they list all the jobs that exist within it, from custodial to top management. Again, we then base numerous activities on those lists, and students take off on individual and group assignments.

"I look to the future, because that's where I'm going to spend the rest of my life."

--George Burns (at age 87)

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The process used to develop this guide was lengthy, exciting, and centered around the daily lives of teachers and students. The first step was a comprehensive review of the literature and a compilation of a survey of promising practices of practitioners in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Alaska, and Hawaii. The literature review and the survey results were documented in the paper Promising Practices for High-Risk Youth in the Northwest Region: Initial Search. This paper set the direction for continued review of recent research and literature about high-risk youth. During this time, as well, programs and classrooms were observed and teachers were interviewed; this resulted in the initial identification of the "Essential Ingredients" in each of the five categories being addressed.

The "Recommendations from Practitioners" section of this guide was gathered through a series of focus groups with practitioners from each state in the Pacific Northwest, in addition to continued observations of programs and interviews with teachers in the region. The goals of the focus groups were to:

- Validate and revise, when necessary, the essential ingredients.
- Glean from the participants their most precious and expert tips, advice, and recommendations for each of the essential ingredients.

Much of what you will read in the "Recommendations from Practitioners" sections is unedited language of the contributing teachers. When an idea or concept was suggested by more than one person, the description may be a composite of their words. We were deluged with so many ideas from teachers that not all of them could be included here. Most that we left out were those that have been written about extensively already, such as cooperative learning, incentive systems for rewarding student behavior, and creating a variety of seating arrangements and classroom layouts.

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